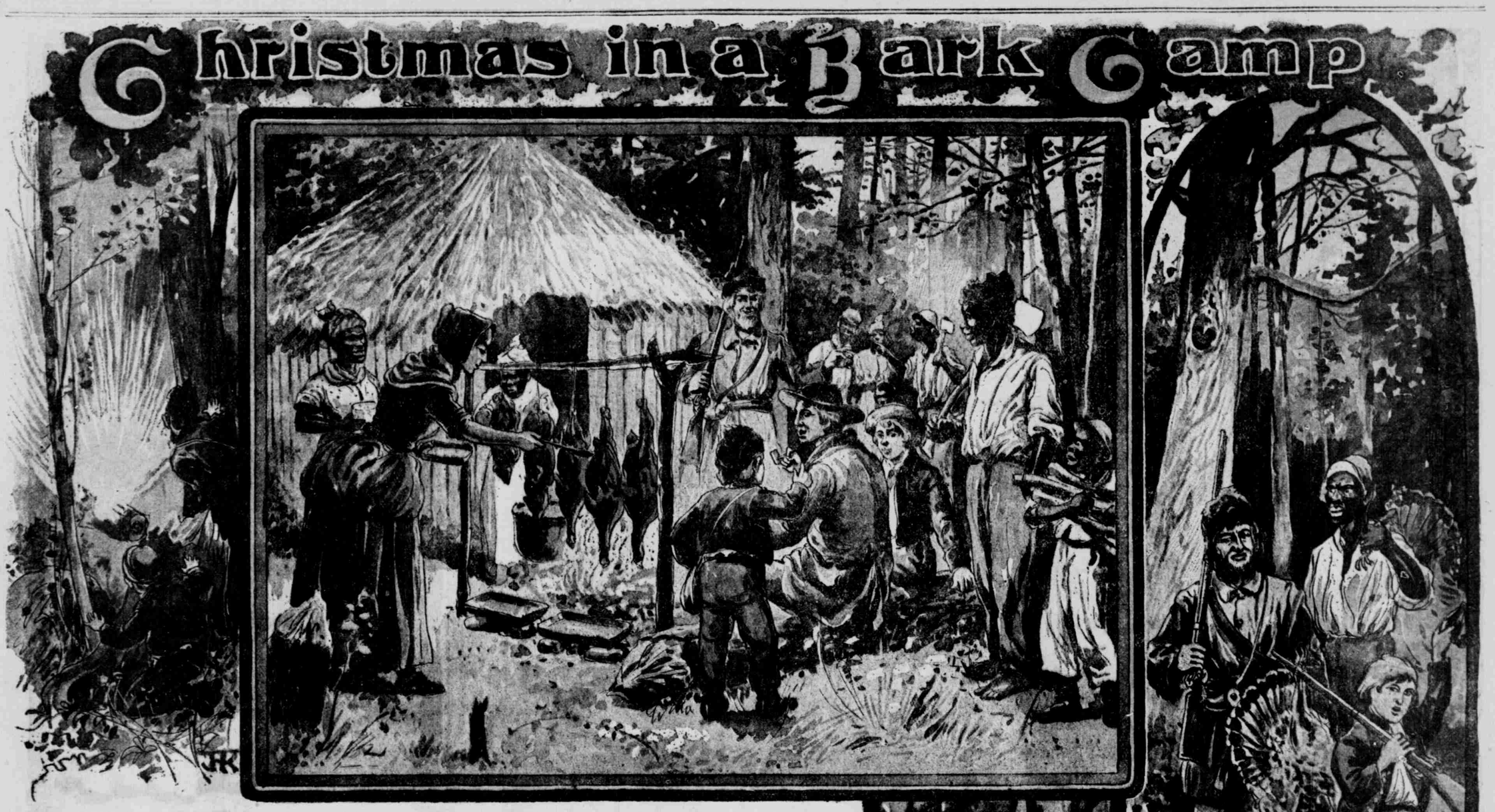
Christmas in a Bark Camp



A Dinner to Dream About

Pioneers in the Early Days of Tennessee and Their Merrymakings During the Holiday Season

By Martha McCulloch Williams

MOVING from North Carolina to Middle Tennessee in the fall of 1805, the Majors family was three months on the way, and got to their journey's end so late in December there seemed no chance at all of having any Christmas. That is, until Shem Gupton came. Shem was also Carolina-bred, and had been across the mountains for years, a hunter and trapper, living in the wilderness and by it, but still neighborly kind.

The bark camp was his suggestion. "Better git somethin' a leetle thicker'n tent cloths er wagin-kivers over the ole lady and the young uns. Thar's nippin' cold weather right ahead," he said. So everybody went to work, cutting down tall, slim trees, chopping them into eight-foot logs and splitting the logs in half. All the men at least, and such of the negro women as could handle axes well. Altogether there were forty souls to be housed. The split logs were set up in a palisade, some little way outside a young tree. The palisade was double, the first row standing bark-side in, the second, lapped on the cracks of the first, bark-side out. Poles ran from the top of it, rafter-wise, to the center tree. Fine brush and leaves, well weighted with earth, made a good roof. There was no fire-place, but at the south side a big opening, through which the light and heat of the roaring campfire came in freely. With a foot of fine dry leaves over the floor, the beds set up, and dressed in gay woolen coverlids, it looked very well.

Two more camps for the blacks were easily put up. While the men were busy building, Mrs. Majors had been burning out a hominy mortar. She got a block off a tree trunk, square at both ends, set it upright and built a fire in the middle of its face, which she watched and tended constantly, feeding it with chips and bark and twigs, never letting it get too big, and still less letting it die out. The result was a deep cupped hollow in the trunk. When the hollow was adzed out and the outer bark skelped off, the mortar was complete. The pestle of dogwood, fine and close-grained, was bluntly rounded, and hardened by thrusting it repeatedly in the fire, withdrawing it as soon as the sap began to hiss.

Black Aaron made the pestle at night beside the campfire. He was a master of hominy-beating. He picked sound flint-corn, threw out all the little grains, and, after wetting it well, dropped it by handfuls in the mortar. Beating and pounding, with a peculiar rotary motion, he soon had the hulls loosened and the grains broken in half. It remained then only to blow away the hulls, wash the hominy and boil it for twelve hours, putting in salt toward the last. A handful of hominy beans was an improvement, but there in the wilderness everybody was well content to do without them.

Mrs. Majors sighed happily as she saw the first big potful set away, beautifully boiled, and sufficient for a week's frying. A skilletful would be dipped out for a meal, and fried in hot bacon fat until there was rich, crisp brown crust all over the bottom. Thus it would go mighty well with the old ham, cooked in another pot that same day, and the haunch of venison Shem had given them, to say nothing of the squirrels, fat and tender, and broiled over the coals. She had besides a brass kettleful of stewed fruit—peaches dried last summer in the old home. That would be dinner enough and good enough for anybody anywhere; she was glad and thankful for it here, where all was so wild. This, the day before Christmas, was the first that anybody had been able to draw breath. Next day would be a holiday—she would send the boys out to hunt nuts and grapes and persimmons.

She said as much to Shem, who smiled shrewdly but made no other reply. After her labors she slept soundly, but not so soundly as to miss hearing the Christmas gun. Rob, her oldest boy, and Shem were answerable for it; they plugged half a pound of powder inside a hollow log and touched it off by means of a greasy string fuse, around 3 o'clock in the morning. After it there was no sleep for anybody. Whites and blacks rolled out and stood huddled about the blazing fires, shouting "Christmas gift! Christmas gift!" at each other. This was "catching Christmas gifts," and entitled the lucky shouter to claim something from the one caught. The blacks knew they would get something, anyway—at least a dram of good whiskey before breakfast.

After breakfast, but still before daybreak, Shem plunged away into the woods with Rob Majors and black Aaron at his heels. The other men and boys scattered through the woods in search of hickory nuts. Walnuts were so plenty right around the camp they were reckoned hardly worth cracking.

Shem took his rifle, Rob his father's gun. A light skim of snow had fallen over night, but the morning was cloudless and nipping cold. The sun was not well above the tree tops when shots sounded in the woods down toward the creek. A little later Shem and his merry men came back whooping joyously, each with a fat wild turkey swung over the shoulder.

"How'd we git um? Jes' couldn't he'p hit—tur-rkeys is so blame plenty in these yere diggin's," Shem said. "I ain't wasted much powder on 'em of late—got plum tired a-eatin' of um the fust three year I wus out yere. Kilt a tur-rkey every day, half picked hit, and sot it up before the fire, so's the breast would roast. That wus all I ever et—took it fer bread like, 'long o' my venison, and I kin stay in these woods a year and lack fer nothin'. Fact is, a body would have to tie his hands behind him ter starve in this country—and eben then hit would be a prutty tough wrastle."

Next Shem called for the bread trays and the children, and with them whipped off to "take a bee tree"—one he had marked in the fall. The tree was a hollow oak—hollow all the way up, although there was only a little open place at the bottom. There Shem built a fire, or rather a smoke, throwing into it certain dry toadstools picked by the way, which set up such a smothering smell it is no wonder it stupefied the poor bees. The tree split open in falling—thus the comb-honey, lifted out into the trays, dripped sweets everywhere. After the comb was out everybody scooped spilled honey with fingers and palms, then licked it off. In spite of that enough remained in the hollow to give Brer Possum and Sis Possum likewise a Christmas treat. Shem said so, and he knew if anybody did.

When the bee hunters got back to camp they found the others with rich spoil of grapes and scaly barks and persimmons. But all those things were quite put out of countenance by the three turkeys duly trussed and stuffed, and swung up before the fire, turning slowly round and round, roasting and giving out the most delicious smell. The venison was simmering in its pot; two 'possums and a coon likewise hung to roast over against the turkeys. Mrs. Majors and two black women had their hands full, keeping everything properly basted, but they let nothing even scorch, and found time to make an oven of biscuit from the very last flour in the sack, and to bake ash-cake in such quantity there was enough left over for breakfast.

Dinner was ready toward 3 o'clock, as nearly as one could guess by the sun. It was eaten from pewter plates or clean wooden ones cut out of big chips, or even off bits of bark. The dinner table still rested in the depths of the big wagon, but the Testament had been got out. After dinner Mr. Majors read a chapter and prayed a short yet fervent prayer. Then the fires were built up afresh, and while the women and children basked in their cheer, the men, except Mr. Majors, went off on a hunt that did not end until daybreak next morning.

Capturing a Filipino

"I SPENT nearly four years in the Philippines," said a captain of the infantry, "and I saw some remarkable examples of personal bravery among the soldiers. I think, though, the most striking example of this sort of thing was shown by Private Cooper, of Company A. A little scouting party of perhaps thirty men were hunting some troublesome insurrectionists in South Luzon. We had camped one night near a little lake. In the morning we pushed on, skirting the lake and marching through a swamp with the water nearly to our hips.

"On the farther side we found a body of natives entrenched behind a breastworks shoulder high. There was no way of flanking them, so we had to make a dash for the very front of their works in the face of a galling fire. They did not stand our return fire long, but fled up the pass, which cut down the mountain. Perhaps fifty of their number tried to cover their retreat, and succeeded in picking off five of our men before we could effectually drive them off.

"Cooper rushed from the ranks and dashed over the breastworks. Just beyond it a Filipino captain was firing from behind a fallen tree. Without an instant's hesitation Cooper jumped down into the fortification and made a rush for the officer. He wrenched the rifle from his hands and, grabbing him by the back of the neck, dragged him outside the breastworks to the lake, where he held him under water for a couple of minutes. We found him there a few moments later, roiling the little Filipino on the ground.

"'When I get the water out of this cuss,' he said, 'maybe I can get some information out, too.'

"He did get some information which led to the capture of thirty-five rifles. Cooper was made a sergeant the next week, and General Chaffee recommended him for a medal for bravery."

Queer Names for Peanuts.

Like the American flag, the American peanut is circling the globe; and it is acquiring some queer names in foreign countries.

In England and Scotland peanuts are called "monkey nuts." In Peru, where they are becoming very popular among the natives, they are termed "cacachatas." In Jamaica, West Indies, the local name is "pindars," and the pindar seller, as he goes his rounds, sings:

"Pindar dyah, young gentleman;
Pindar dyah, young lady;
Pindar dyah, young gentleman.
Now call you' pindar bwoy."

In West Virginia the country folk call peanuts "gubba peas," and in South Carolina "ground peas."

These Men Have No Christmas Dinners

IF EVER there was a man who deserves to be remembered around Christmas time that man is Uncle Sam's life saver. But he hardly ever or never is, and as a result he is a man who rarely knows the joys of a Christmas dinner.

This is especially true of life savers stationed along the southern beach of Long Island. The beach for nearly the whole length of the island is merely a strip of sand separated from the main body of the island by a series of bays of varying magnitude. It is uninhabited except by the life savers, and even in summer, when access to it is comparatively easy by sail boat, very few visitors find their way there.

When winter comes the life savers practically lead the existence of castaways. Once a week or so, if the bay on which a station is situated is safely frozen over, a member of the crew will cross it and bring back the mail and a few provisions from a neighboring village. Beyond this there is no communication with the outside world, and for weeks at a stretch even this is frequently impossible, owing to bad ice.

Therefore, when Christmas dawns it usually finds the life savers feasting, not on turkey and cranberry sauce and plum pudding, but on salt horse and sourkrout, which is supplied to them in abundance by the Government as their daily fare.

Nor is the Christmas spirit evident in other ways. The coast is patrolled as usual; a moment's relaxation of vigilance in celebration of the day might doom a ship's crew, and inclination on the part of the relief to linger over the frugal dinner of salt horse might cause the men on patrol to suffer severe injury from too long exposure to the bitter cold. Even when the families of some of the crew live near by the station in doll-like frame houses, as is not infrequently the case, the day can scarcely be distinguished from its 364 prototypes. Uncle Sam doesn't give his coast guards munificent wages, and therefore the boys and girls of the life saver pass the day much as their father does, without the receipt of holiday trinkets or a taste of the juicy breast of a turkey cooked to a golden brown.

But there is one station on Long Island's southern beach that is the exception to the rule. It is off Southampton, where many of New York's wealthy residents spend the holiday season in their country residences. They invariably see to it that the crew at the Southampton station is bountifully supplied with Christmas cheer of all sorts, and the way turkeys and toys pour in upon the men would be overwhelming were it not for the fact that life savers have notoriously fine appetites and their children can find uses for every trinket given them.

Four miles east of Southampton is the Shinnecock station. Some of the men there have not had a real Christmas dinner for years; and their experience is that of the average guard in the fifty odd stations strung along the length of the same beach.

Fashion's Latest Monstrosities.

Some of the new leather, suede, morocco and silk belts are perfect monstrosities, and it is to be hoped that all dainty women will put their stamp of disapproval on them. They come in all colors and all widths, but the one upon which fashion has set its seal is about four inches wide and undeniably ugly.

One of the prettiest leather belts is the Japanese, which has the dragon embroidered on it in different shades. It has a silver or gold dragon mounting.

The buckles were never handsomer. Chinese ones of jadestone and crystals, set with garnets, are taken from the men's wraps and used for buckles.

New Uses for the Nutritious Banana

AMERICANS devour an unthinkable number of bananas and help to make the fortunes of Jamaica, Costa Rica, Santa Domingo, and other tropical lands in so doing; but very few Americans know how to make the best use of the banana. They usually eat it raw, and find that, after a time, it becomes tedious and tasteless as an article of diet.

The eating of the banana in all kinds of ways should be encouraged, for it is one of the most nutritious foods in the world. A Mexican chemist has been comparing bananas with wheat and potatoes for food, and has arrived at the conclusion that for the same space and under the same conditions of cultivation the production of bananas is forty times that of potatoes and one hundred times that of wheat. He has figured out that an area of land which will raise enough wheat to feed six men will produce enough bananas to feed one hundred and fifty men.

Bananas being so valuable, here are a few receipts for using them which American housekeepers will appreciate after a trial. They are highly valued in Jamaica, the principal banana growing country:

Roasted Bananas.—Take as many bananas as are required and place them on a griddle over the fire. Allow them to remain until the skin turns quite black, then take them off and run a fork down the middle. Take the bananas out and lay them on a dish. Dust with fine sugar and squeeze a lemon over them. This makes them delicious, but many Jamaicans, instead of using lemon, eat them with cream.

Banana Fritters.—Take half a dozen ripe bananas (the riper the better), peel them and mash them very fine. Then add 2 well beaten eggs and enough flour to form a stiff paste. Drop them into a well-buttered, hot frying pan and allow to fry for about ten minutes. Serve them hot, with sifted sugar and a slice of lemon.

Baked Bananas.—Slice lengthwise enough bananas to fill a pie dish, sprinkle a little sugar over them, and bake for fifteen minutes in a hot oven. When cooked, serve with cream.

Banana Filling for Cakes.—Take 3 bananas, mash them well with a little sugar and spice, and add a glass of port wine. Then rub them into a smooth paste and spread between layers of sponge cake. This must be used on the day of making, or the banana filling will become sour and unfit for use.

Dried Bananas.—Take 2 dozen good ripe bananas. Put them in the sun on wire frames to dry. Turn the bananas two or three times a day, and continue this process for five or six days until the bananas are brown and of a mellow consistency. Then can them. They may be packed in tins or boxes which have been lined with paper. While drying the bananas, keep a net over them to prevent flies from getting on them. These dried bananas are sometimes called "banana figs."

Boiled Banana Pudding.—Take 1 cupful of dried bananas, chopped fine. Mix it with 1 cupful of breadcrumbs and ¼ cupful of chopped suet and 2 eggs, well beaten. Flavor with spice and rosewater. Butter a mould well, and pour the pudding into it. Boil for three hours, and serve with wine sauce.

How to Make a White Gown Smart

A white gown may be made very smart with a trimming of orchids, which is expensive to buy, but easy to make if one can embroider. These flowers and leaves are appliqued. They look especially beautiful on gold and silver cloth.